

# Reflective practice for home visitors: From reflective conversations to reflective supervision/consultation



The Minnesota Coalition for Targeted Home Visiting  
Michele Fallon  
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## Plan for our time together

- What is reflective functioning and why does it matter?
- Reflective practice—what, why and how
- Having difficult (but reflective!) conversations: Self-awareness, careful observation and flexible response
- Reflective supervision and consultation
- Next steps...

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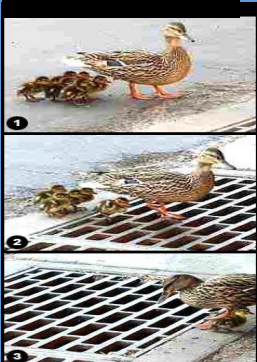
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What is reflective functioning and why does it matter—  
For parenting?  
Home visiting?

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**Reflective functioning is a basic human capacity—it is what allows us to make sense of the people in our world.**

Arietta Slade (2002)



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**What is reflective functioning?**

(aka 'mind-mindedness', 'mentalization')

- The capacity to **recognize "mental states"**--feelings, thoughts, intentions—in self & others:
  - *I find myself dreading this home visit.*
  - *I wonder why this mom seems so angry?*

And...

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**What is reflective functioning?**

(aka 'mind-mindedness', 'mentalization')

- The capacity to **link mental states to behavior**, i.e. how a person thinks and feels shows up in their behavior:
  - *I think I'm irritable because I'm so behind in my paperwork.*
  - *I wonder if that mom 'no shows' because she is worried that I will judge her.*

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### Reflective Functioning, then...

- Is the necessary capacity for attunement to the thoughts, feelings and intentions of **ourselves and others**—
- Which allows us to read, interpret, and respond empathically to the cues of others,
- **And is necessary for self-regulation.**

**Keeping the baby in mind:** a critical skill for healthy parenting.




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### What's so important about reflective functioning?

*Without an emotional understanding of the child, parenting skills are of little use, and remain empty recipes that bear little relation to the child's internal experience and needs.*



Arietta Slade

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### What is reflective practice? And why do it?




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**Why is reflection necessary in our work?**

Because we are human,

*...it is not possible to work on behalf of human beings to try to help them without having powerful feelings aroused in yourself.*



Jeree Pawl  
(It's biology...)

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**Complexity of Reflective Issues in Home Visiting**

(Davies, 2014)

The home visitor working on behalf of the child and their family is challenged to take into account the differing mental and emotional perspectives of:

- The infant or toddler
- Other children in the family
- The parent(s)
- Other significant caregivers
- Other professionals
- Own internal perspective

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**Reflective Practice as a Way of Being**

- A “portable lens” for observing interactions and our own reactions;
- Acknowledging that “feelings” are an important source of information;
- And that all behavior has meaning—*What is this child (or parent) trying to tell me?*




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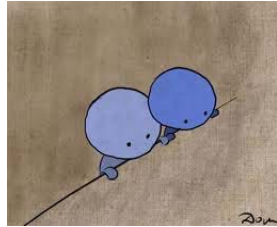
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**What is Reflective Practice?**

*The art of 'stepping back' to examine what one is observing and doing;*

Alicia Lieberman

Reflecting ON action so we can reflect IN action Schon




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**What is Reflective Practice?**

- Thinking about and analyzing your actions in order to improve your professional practice.
- It involves exploring and explaining events, not just describing them.
- It Involves analyzing your anxieties, errors and weaknesses, as well as your strengths and successes.




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**We must allow ourselves...**

- Not to **know**
- To be **surprised** or **confused**
- To **wonder why** :
  - *Why I reacted the way I did?*
  - *Why I handled a situation the way I did?*
  - *Why the parent is reacting this way?*
  - *What was going on with the child or parent?*




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### What happens in your mind while you are with a parent or child:

Professionals continually question their own and other's internal mental state:

- What is happening now?
- Why are they saying this now?
- Why are they behaving like this?
- Why am I feeling as I do now?
- What has happened recently that may justify the current state?



Mentalization Based Family Treatment (MBFT)  
(Aisen, Fonagy et al, 2011)

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### Important questions for helping us to reflect: Taking multiple perspectives

- *What's it like to be this mom?*
- *What's it like to be this dad?*
- *What's it like to be this child?*
- *What is the meaning of this child to this family?*
- *What's it like to be me (the home visitor) in this situation?*
- *What does my presence mean to this family?*



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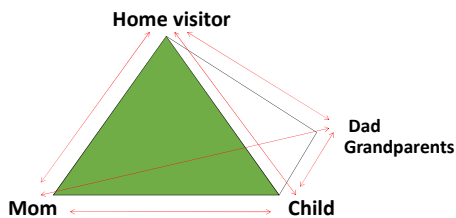
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### Attending to All the Relationships: The Perspective Pyramid




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Five powerful words for giving parents the experience of "being held in the mind of another":



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### Inviting reflection from parents: The Power of Open-ended Questions

Using questions and listening rather than being the "expert" with the answers---

- Acknowledges the complexity of the situation and the need for individualized solutions;
- Acknowledges the parent/caregiver as the expert on his or her child.



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### The Power of Open-ended Questions

- *What were you thinking/feeling then?*
- *How did you know....?*
- *What do you think he's trying to tell you?*
- *What did you do? Why do you think that worked/didn't work?*
- *Tell me about a time when things seemed to go well.*
- ***I wonder.....***



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**Partner activity**

- Find a partner.
- Identify a “talk first” person
- Then we will switch roles and use a different set of questions.




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**Conversation Number 1:**

- **Talking First Person:** Tell your partner about a time that a child/parent was difficult to work with. Share some of the details about the event.
- **Listening First Person** - Use some of these questions after your partner has shared their story. Try to only use the questions listed.
  - *Who is it you are talking about?*
  - *Which staff or peers were involved in the situation?*
  - *What did you do about it?*
  - *When did it happen?*
  - *How long have you worked with this parent/child?*
  - *Where did it happen?*

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**Conversation Number 2: Switch Roles**

- **Talking Person:** Tell your partner about a time that a child/parent was difficult to work with. Share some of the details about the event.
- **Listener:** Use some of these questions after your partner has shared their story. Try to only use the questions listed.
  - *What was it like for you when that happened?*
  - *Did this remind you of another similar incident/parent/child?*
  - *I wonder what it felt like to be the child/parent in that situation.*
  - *What do you think they were trying to tell you when they did that?*
  - *What might be going on for this parent/child/family at home/school?*
  - *Is this how it usually goes with this child/parent? How would you like it to go?*

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### The need for self-awareness



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### The need for self-awareness & reflection

- Your own feelings are an essential source of information as you decide whether and how to respond.
- Our own histories, experiences, values, implicit biases and assumptions are with us every minute in our work and affect how we interact.



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### What happens in your mind while you are with a parent?

Professionals continually question their own and other's internal mental state:

- *What is happening now?*
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Mentalization Based Family Treatment (MBFT)  
(Aislin, Fonagy et al. 2013)

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### The need for self-awareness & reflection

- Working with young children and their families is **relationship-based work**, which requires us to engage our emotions as well as our intellect.
- We can become overwhelmed & susceptible to many of the same stressors as the families and children with whom we work.




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### Having those hard conversations (Planned or 'in the moment')




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### Talking about the "hard stuff:"

- **Why is it important** to talk about difficult things like referrals for children, concerning practices, chemical use, birth control, mental health concerns?
- **What gets in our way** of asking about these topics with parents?
- **How do we balance** asking about 'hard things' while acknowledging our limits of practice?
- **How do we keep the children "in the lens"** when bringing up difficult topics?

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### The good news is that...

- How we handle/repair misunderstandings, mistakes and difficult situations with parents can actually strengthen relationship.
- We have the opportunity to offer parents a different experience of "hard conversations:"
  - *People don't go away when I mess up.*
  - *Adults can admit they make mistakes (especially someone in a perceived position of power).*
  - *"Big feelings" can be worked through without rupturing the relationship.*

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### Reflection--helping us decide what to do...

*Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006*

- **Careful observation**— *What's happening here? What is the meaning of the behavior I am seeing?*
- **Self-awareness**— *What are my thoughts and feelings about this? Where do they come from?*
- **Flexible response**—
  - *What are my goals?*
  - *What responses will best fit this parent or caregiver?*
  - *How am I being intentional in my responses to address the goals (KNOW why that's the intervention you are choosing).*

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### Assess the Situation (Careful Observation)

- Where does this interaction fall on the continuum—positive, potentially harmful, or abusive/neglectful?
- Is the child in danger?
- Is this part of a pattern?
- What is my relationship with this caregiver?

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### Identify your own reactions (Self awareness)

- **Do I identify with the child?** (which may feel like fear, shame, guilt, confusion)
- **Do I identify with the caregiver?** (which may feel like annoyance, anger, frustration)
- **Am I feeling judgmental?** (which may lead to feelings of rejection, anger, hostility)
- **Am I missing important information?** What else do I need to know? (which may make me feel uncertain about what to do)

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### Is culture influencing my reaction? The painful topic of implicit bias

- Implicit bias refers to the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways.
- We ALL have implicit biases—it's the way our brain works.
- For example: Implicit biases *"do not begin with black men and police. They begin with young black boys and their preschool teachers — if not earlier."* Black preschoolers are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more suspensions relative to White preschoolers. (Gilliam, 2016)

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### Flexible response

**Identify goals**--based on self-awareness and careful observation:

- Am I expecting to help, support, provide information, reduce tension, prevent harm?
- Am I acting on my beliefs and values about protecting children and supporting caregivers?

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**Deciding when and how to intervene:***Self-awareness, careful observation, flexible response*Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006

- Intervene as primary prevention—offer support and positive feedback;
- Intervene when you sense tension building—provide help and relief;
- Intervene when you see something harmful or potentially harmful;
- Intervene when you can be a nonjudgmental helper (without taking sides).

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**Choosing not to intervene in the moment:**

- When you have very strong feelings that may not be fully under control;
- When you are just so uncomfortable you can't act right away;
- When you are uncertain about the meaning of the behavior, e.g. difference in values or culture that are surprising but not harmful
- Disadvantages outweigh advantages, e.g. low risk situation & need more relationship time

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**Considering the possible results:***Careful observation and flexible response*

- The parent may have a negative reaction to your intervention.
- This is less likely if you have established a relationship and respond empathically.
- Parents are likely to feel cared about, helped, noticed and respected when you offer supportive responses. (*You 'get it.'*)
- You are likely to feel good about acting on your values and beliefs.

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**Organizing language for BOTH parent and child**

*Whenever speaking directly to the parent or directly to the child, [we] must keep the parent-child relationship in mind.*

Lieberman and Van Horn



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**Strategies**

- Turning judgment into an internal question--*I wonder what happened to you?...vs. What's wrong with you?*
- Use humor (*It can be challenging to raise a strong woman!*)
- Talking for the child--(*Mom, I'm crying because I missed you so much.*)
- Empathic non-verbals
- Useful phrases—see handout



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**Think of a hard conversation you need[ed] to have with a provider**

- What makes this challenging?
- What gets in your way?
- On a scale of one to ten, how hard would this be for you and why?
- And a little practice....



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**What are my coping strategies for managing intense feelings in the moment?**




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**What is reflective supervision/consultation (RS/C)?**




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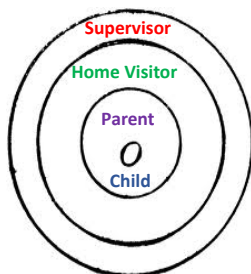
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**What is Reflective Supervision/Consultation?**

A **parallel process** which seeks to provide a validating, partnering relationship with the home visitor which promotes the relationship between the home visitor and the child, the home visitor and the parent, and the parent and the child.



**You can't give what you don't get!**

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### What is Reflective Supervision/Consultation?

A safe **relationship** for learning where strengths are supported and vulnerabilities are partnered.

Rebecca Shamooh-Shanok



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### What is Reflective Supervision/Consultation?

A validating, partnering relationship that offers a 'holding environment' for feelings, mistakes and new learning.



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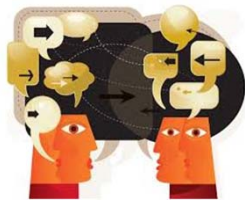
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### What is Reflective Supervision/Consultation?



A shared process of inquiry using open-ended questions to facilitate the supervisee's own insights and reflections, rather than advice-giving.

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### Essential elements of RS/C: Content

(Watson, Harrison, Hennes, Harris 2017)

- **Understanding the family story** and focusing on the relationships among the adults;
- **Professional use of self** and paying attention to the relationships the practitioner has with others;
- **Holding the baby in mind** and attending to the baby's relationships;
- **Parallel process**--noting the way in which one relationship affects and is affected by other relationships.

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### Why do reflective supervision?

- A way to slow the work down for consideration;
- Helps to establish the boundaries and scope of practice (*What is my role and what is not?*); Eggbeer, Mann & Siebel (2007)
- To assure high quality services to young children and their families;
- Reduce stress and burnout for home visitors;
- To replenish the reserves needed to interact with families in a responsive, supportive, and planful manner.




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### Why do reflective supervision?

- Supporting staff members' professional development—supervision as a “relationship for learning” (Fenichel, 1992)
- Creating a 'holding environment—a sense of safety even in the face of strong feelings or mistakes made.
- Allowing ourselves NOT to know;




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### Why do reflective supervision?

- An opportunity to explore issues of implicit bias and cultural humility.



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### 'How?'—A Way of Being

*How you are is as important as what you do.*

- Relationships are the heart of reflective supervision;
- Supervisor as 'partner' rather than 'expert';
- Parallel process as an organizing principle;
- Consistent and predictable (as possible...)



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### Engaging our organizations

- How do you feel reflective supervision might benefit your workplace?
- Who needs to "buy into" the idea?
- What might be some next steps for you to introduce reflective supervision to your workplace?
- What barriers might you anticipate?
- What resources are available for your own reflective supervision?



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**Reflective Supervision/Consultation Resources**

**The Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health—  
Infant and Early Childhood Division**



Contact:

Arielle Handevitd at [ahandevitd@macmh.org](mailto:ahandevitd@macmh.org)

Or

Michele Fallon at [whataboutthebaby@comcast.net](mailto:whataboutthebaby@comcast.net)

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